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FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1902

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 001268

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DEPT FOR S/I AND NEA/I

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2017

TAGS: PREL ECON ENRG EAID IZ JA

SUBJECT: JAPAN HOPES TO "UPGRADE" RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAQ

REF: TOKYO 1058

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Japan wishes to upgrade its relations with Iraq from one of a donor nation to a "long-term and strategic partnership," according to MOFA sources. To achieve this end, Japan will be hosting three high-level bilateral exchanges in the next few weeks. Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi will visit Tokyo March 21-24. The Iraqi Minister of National Reconciliation and 15 leading persons including parliamentarians will visit Japan March 25-31 to attend a conference to promote national reconciliation. And Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki is said to be planning to visit April 4-7, although these dates have yet to be officially announced. In addition, Japanese Minister of Defense Fumio Kyuma has let it be known to the press that he plans to visit Japan's Air Self Defense Forces (ASDF) based in Kuwait and to meet with Prime Minister Maliki in Baghdad sometime during the week of April 30. Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki March 20 reaffirmed Japan's support for Iraq, and it seems likely the Iraq Special Measures Law will be extended for two years, despite slipping public opinion regarding the war. END
SUMMARY.

HOPE FOR UPGRADED RELATIONS

¶2. (C) Japan will embark on a series of events in the next few weeks in an attempt to create a "long-term and strategic partnership" with Iraq, stepping up from "just a donor nation", according to MOFA Second Middle East Division Principal Deputy Director Motosada Motano. MOFA released a press statement to that effect March 17, and also officially announced the visit to Tokyo of Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi March 21-24, and the holding in Tokyo of a national reconciliation conference for Iraq to which have been invited the Iraqi Minister of National Reconciliation and 15 other leading individuals, including parliamentarians.

Motano also told Political Officer that Tokyo plans to host a visit by Prime Minister al-Maliki in early April, but is still trying to work out the details with the Iraqis. During Hashimi's visit, he will meet Foreign Minister Aso and have dinner with Prime Minister Abe. Other events will include a luncheon hosted by the Iraqi Ambassador and a speech to be given at JIIA. The message he will hear from the Japanese, according to Motano, is one of continued support, with the caveat that Iraq must stand on its own, similar to the message delivered by President Bush in his January address on Iraq.

¶3. (C) In addition to the upcoming visits to Japan by Iraqi leaders, Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma has let it be known in the press that he plans to visit Kuwait the week of April 30 to inspect the ASDF deployed there supporting UNAMI and MNF-I. During the visit he reportedly plans to go to Baghdad to meet with Prime Minister Maliki. Motano would not confirm or deny these reports, but commented MOFA is miffed that Kyuma should discuss so openly a visit which normally calls for tight security.

IRAQI NATIONAL RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE

¶4. (U) The Iraqi Minister of National Reconciliation and 15 other leading Iraqis, including members of the Council of Representatives, will visit Japan March 25-31 to attend a national reconciliation conference. According to Motano, this event will be hosted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and will consist primarily of lectures given by professors on reconciliation case studies, including South Africa, Northern Ireland, and East Timor. Motano said Japan's approach to this conference is not to deliver or push a policy message. Rather, Tokyo's "humble" hope is that it can foster a learning and "thinking aloud" process for the Iraqi participants. The conference will also feature a visit to Hiroshima to impress upon the participants the importance of peace and reconciliation.

EXTENSION OF JAPANESE ASDF DEPLOYMENT

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¶5. (U) The Abe Administration continues to move forward with the renewal of the Iraq Special Measures Law authorizing the deployment of ASDF assets in Iraq. On March 15, the government decided to adopt a plan within the month to extend the law for two years and is now coordinating with the ruling party to finalize this decision on March 27. Once that is accomplished, a vote in the Diet will be required.

¶6. (U) In the meantime, the government continues to speak publicly in support of Iraq. During his daily press conference March 20, Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki reiterated the Abe Administration's support for Iraq. When asked to comment on the fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq, Shiozaki responded: "Efforts are being made steadfastly toward the building of a new country by the Iraqis themselves. Japan will continue its active support to help the Iraqi people rebuild Iraq." These comments come despite polls which show Japanese public support for the war is slipping. According to an Asahi Shimbun survey published March 16, 69 percent of voters oppose the government's plan to extend the ASDF deployment, and 75 percent of respondents said the U.S. invasion of Iraq was "wrong."

¶7. (C) The government is not too concerned by the slipping poll numbers, said Motano, and is confident the measure will pass. However, politicians are sensitive to the issue, particularly in light of the upcoming July Upper House elections, and would rather Iraq be kept on a back burner as far as the public is concerned. He said the fact the Ground Self Defense Forces are no longer deployed has meant less public attention to Iraq.

¶8. (C) Politicians are also very sensitive to the perceived reasons for voting to extend, explained Motano. The worst possible situation would be for it to appear that Japan is extending the law at the request of, or under pressure from, the United States. Accordingly, another reason for the high-level visits is to let Japanese decision makers hear an appeal directly from the Iraqis that the ASDF continue its mission. This, in addition to a letter received several days

ago from UN Secretary General Ban asking Japan to continue to provide ASDF support to UNAMI, will make it more palatable for some Diet members to vote to extend. (NOTE: The receipt of the UN letter has not yet been disclosed. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

19. (C) Despite the lack of public support for the war in Iraq, the Japanese government will remain firm in its support for Iraqi reconstruction and will do what it can to promote peace and stability. Japan's interest in Iraq can be clearly found in Foreign Minister Aso's recent speech on "Middle East Policy As I See It" (reftel.) First, the fact Japan wants to upgrade its relationship to that of a "long-term strategic partnership" is due to its heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil and the fact that the Japanese believe Iraq sits atop one third of the world's proven reserves. Second, Japan fears the spread of instability throughout the region (and its effects on the oil markets) should Iraq continue to descend into chaos. And third, Japan wants to use its goodwill to serve as a facilitator on peaceful ground between adversaries who may be more likely to discuss reconciliation efforts in Japan than they would or could in Iraq.

SCHIEFFER